

Innovative Groundwater Modeling Changes Attitudes About Milwaukee Brownfields

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An innovative approach to groundwater modeling provided the information Milwaukee needed to remove market barriers to redevelopment in the Menomonee River Valley. When the simulation produced by USGS, with EPA brownfields and city funding, showed surface recharge mostly going to the deep sewer tunnel system rather than to the river, regulators and developers started seeing more possibilities for re-use of sites in the urban, industrial valley. A pro-active approach to media communication paved the way for more intelligent and less sensational coverage of the information developed through both the modeling and an area-wide contaminant groundwater study. Scientists offered the information in formats understandable to journalists and developers, so that it could be used by the city as a tool to enhance community acceptance of brownfields solutions. The EPA brownfields pilot grant and brownfields showcase community designation resulted in a strong partnership between the city, federal agencies, state regulators, nonprofit organizations, local developers and environmental consultants. A 1,500-acre area was removed from the shadow of a reputation as the “most contaminated place in Wisconsin” using sound science, teamwork and effective communication.